

THE NORTHEAST PEOPLE OF COLOR CONFERENCE

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The first Northeast People of Color (NEPOC) conference was held at Western New England School of Law (WNESL) in Springfield, Massachusetts in the spring of 1992 or 1993 and was hosted by Len Baynes, who is now Dean of University of Houston Law School. NEPOC grew out of Len's profound sense of isolation. He believed people of color in the academy needed a safe place to develop their scholarship and to socialize. Keep in mind the 1990s were a time when the scholarship written by professors of color was under attack. The movement called Critical Race Theory was in its infancy and a safe space was needed for those who had just started writing, or had decided not to write traditional law review pieces. In either case many of our home institutions were not supportive and many faculty of color were isolated in schools that had very few minority faculty and few if any senior faculty of color. Instead of blossoming, minority law professors and their scholarship were withering away on the vine.

While folks were gathered at Springfield, I volunteered to host the next meeting at New England Law School (NESL). A NEPOC planning committee came together that weekend and planning for the second conference began. The NESL conference came off well because Boston was easy to get to and, more importantly, people were hungry for the opportunity to collaborate and socialize. Deborah Post and I did not actually meet each other until the NESL conference itself but Professor Post soon became a permanent member of the planning committee. I believe Professor Post has participated in every conference since then.

Although the composition of the committee changes as the event moves from school to school, there are many people who have played an important part in several conferences including Pamela Edwards, Elaine Chiu who succeeded Len Baynes as Director of the Ron Brown Center, and Fabio Arcila and then Deseriee Kennedy from Touro organized the "work in progress" sessions.

All of the planning for NEPOC is done by phone and email. Early on NEPOC began recognizing the contributions of faculty of color who were labeled "pioneers" or "trailblazers" At the 1998 meeting of NEPOC at Touro Law School, faculty of color who had been teaching for over twenty years were honored. Derrick Bell not only spoke and read from his book, *Gospel Choirs*, he brought a choir with him that heightened the experience with their moving rendition of spirituals. His contribution to the symposium issue published by the Touro Law Review, *The First Colony*, speculated metaphorically about the survival of those people of color who were the first to take up law teaching in what were essentially all white institutions.

That meeting was the first of many times that we recognized and honored those who paved the way in the legal academy for minority faculty. One of my fondest memories of NEPOC is the year we recognized Frank Bae as a trailblazer. Frank, an Asian-American, had been NESL's librarian for more than two decades. Until then I did not fully understand how much and for how long he had suffered in silence. Our recognition of him was easily his happiest moment in his professional career. He never stopped thanking me and talking about it.

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Perhaps almost by accident, a cultural, social celebration became part of the NEPOC planning format. When we were at Touro in year three, the minority students prepared food that was served at the local art cinema where we viewed the film "Fire." When NEPOC was held in New Bedford, at Southern New England School of Law, now University of Massachusetts Dartmouth School of Law, where I was Dean, we had a screening of *Rush to Execution* about abolishing the death penalty.

It was Len Baynes, as Director of the Ron Brown Center at St. Johns University School of Law, who gave NEPOC a home at the Center, made sure that NEPOC became an institution, not a temporary or transient gathering for purposes of promoting scholarship, mentoring, bonding and celebration. He also insisted that we remember and celebrate the places from which many of the parents of our members emigrated. The first meeting in Puerto Rico featured a panel on sovereignty for Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Washington, D.C. Conferences were also held in Barbados and in the Bahamas. As Dean Len Baynes pointed out, for many of us, these conferences were a form of "homecoming."

NEPOC became one of the annual events people in the academy look forward to because interesting scholarship, good company, and great food are always guaranteed. People ask me all the time whether I miss teaching. The truth is, I seldom miss teaching, but I do miss the fellowship. I miss seeing my friends and hearing about what is going on. Staying involved with NEPOC as an elder statesperson has been a joy.

